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WCC RACE CONFERENCE
HEARS NATIVE AMERICAN PLEA

NEW YORK -- A World Council of Churches conference on racism has affirmed that organization's Program to Combat Racism and a continued emphasis on southern Africa, but the only Native American at the conference feels there is much work against racism that member churches should be doing at home.

Steve Charleston, staff officer for Indian work at the Episcopal Church Center, was one of 20 delegates from American churches at the June 16-21 consultation held in the Netherlands. Seventy countries were represented by 100 delegates in the Consultation entitled "Churches Responding to Racism in the 1980s." A major focus of the Consultation was an evaluation of the controversial Program to Combat Racism, a special WCC organ funded by designated gifts. It is not part of the World Council's general budget and receives no funding from the Episcopal Church.

The Consultation branded racism as "an assault on Christ's values and a rejection of his sacrifice," and declared that "wherever it appears, whether in the individual or in the collective, it is sin."

A concluding statement adopted June 21 by the group also applauded the contribution which the Program to Combat Racism, with its highly controversial funding of liberation movements, especially in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), had made to the struggle against racism in the 1970s.

The statement praised the "prophetic nature" of financial grants to African liberation movements.

The grants made in 1979 to guerillas of the Patriotic Front who were fighting to overthrow the Rhodesian government had been severely criticized by some European and American churches. Leaders of the Patriotic Front now hold the reins of government in independent Zimbabwe, which was formerly Rhodesia.

"Racist" church structures were also addressed in the statement. Churches were criticized for "merely reflecting their social environment" and not including the racially oppressed in leadership roles or decision-making processes.

It was this latter aspect that Charleston attempted to address in a speech delivered to one of the Consultation plenary sessions. Claiming that Native Americans had "always existed in the twilight zone of American history," Charleston told the delegates that probably no one there had a true picture of the American Indian. "Through wild west shows and decades of movies, the image is still largely a product of Hollywood and strongly racist."

He noted that children throughout the world grew up watching those movies and playing "cowboys and Indians" and that "the Indians were always the bad guys."

He expressed fear that the seven working groups would fail to consider Native Americans in their deliberations simply because there were not representatives in each group. He laid out some concerns he hoped they would consider.

To the working group on theology, he said he hoped they would recognize that the era of "western European male dominance of theology was over" and that they would be aware of the rise of indigenous theologies.

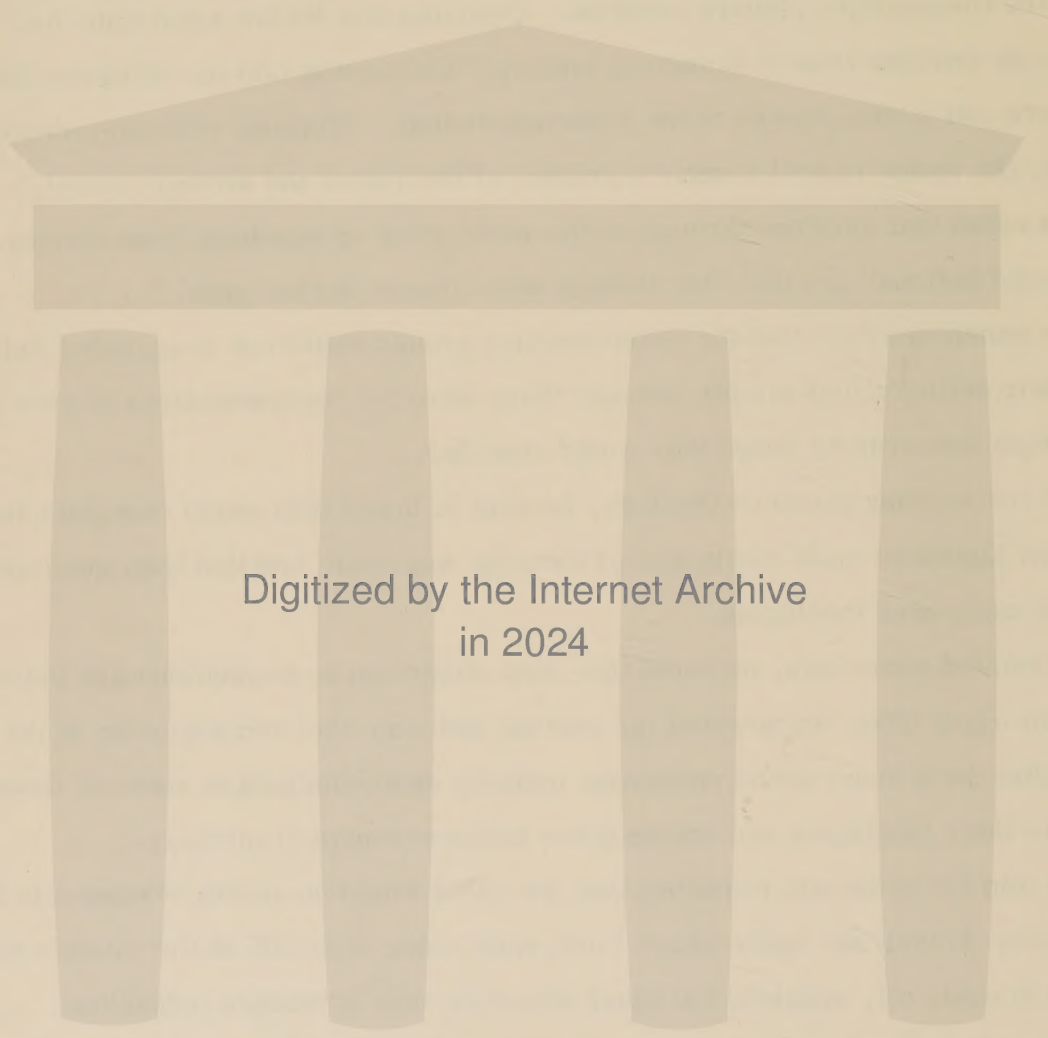
In related comments, he noted that most American denominations had Indian churches within them which often represented the poorest and most isolated segments of the Church. He hoped that the Council would encourage member denominations to seek out those Churches, incorporate their theologies and create more active channels of ministry.

He told the economic workshop that the 1980s would be an era of economic backlash against Native Americans under whose lands exist more than 40% of the nation's natural resources in coal, oil, uranium and other minerals vital to modern technology.

He said the historic pattern of moving the Indian from the sites that the dominant culture found valuable would be repeated. He pointed to the similarity of the Republic of South Africa's policy of shifting its unwanted races to useless, arid homelands in the name of either economics or national security.

In the latter area, he noted that the proposed MX missile system was to be placed largely on lands owned or held sacred by Native American nations and predicted that national security would be another excuse to set back Native American struggles against racism.

Many of Charleston's concerns were reflected in the papers presented by the working groups and in the final statement, but he remains concerned over the programmatic focus on southern Africa.



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The original proposal had asked that the Churches, through the Program to Combat Racism, "continue to give priority to Namibia and South Africa." Charleston and others worked to have that modified to the final statement holding that "while continuing to give priority in Africa to Namibia and South Africa, the Program to Combat Racism should also lift up to a higher priority areas of racial oppression that are both pervasive and enslaving."

"Our concern," he explained, "is that the focus on southern Africa is so seductive. Many member denominations relieve themselves of the necessity of attacking racism in every home congregation by giving money to this effort in southern Africa. We just don't do full justice to the pervasive nature of racism -- the kind of racism that produces that negative stereotype of Indians -- by encouraging members to focus on the victories in southern Africa. We simply hope to broaden the Program's understanding of its role and help the denominations take leadership in attacking that kind of racism at home."

In its final statement, the consultation scored the "dominant economic systems of the world" which promote "the self-interest, greed, and values of the 'white world.'"

It gave priority in its recommendations to measures aimed at "eliminating" apartheid in South Africa and South Africa-administered Namibia, calling on the 283 Protestant and Orthodox WCC member churches to make an "anti-apartheid stand" an "article of faith in the 1980s."

Among other recommendations were calls for WCC member churches to:

- examine criminal justice systems from the perspectives of the racially oppressed.
- support efforts to provide legal advice and aid for groups involved in land rights struggles.
- bring before the United Nations the need for a "Charter of Rights" for oppressed minority groups.

"Racism," the consultation concluded, "is a challenge to the kind of world God wants, a barrier to the Kingdom of God. Therefore, the struggle against racism cannot be optional for Christians."

The WCC's Central Committee will consider the conference recommendations at a meeting in August.

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The meeting was the culmination of a process of consultation which has been going on among churches and oppressed racial groups around the world for the past 18 months. Started at the request of the WCC Central Committee meeting in Jamaica in 1979, the purpose of the process was to study new manifestations of racism, recommend ways of combating it in the 1980s and review the experience the churches have gained through the Program to Combat Racism since it began in 1969. The program is funded separately from the WCC's main budget through special grants from participating member denominations.

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